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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Introduction

Eradication of poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today. Poverty is pervasive in developing countries, especially in the rural areas where 70 per cent of the world's poorest live, as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) points out in the *Rural Poverty Report 2011*.

In developing countries, most rural households remain dependent on primitive agriculture. Some 2 billion farmers, the majority of whom are women, engage in small-scale agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that two thirds of the female labour force in developing economies are engaged in agricultural activities. Women generally play an important role in crop production, livestock care and in water and fuel collection for their families.

The typical fate of a rural woman is a demanding combination of unpaid subsistence farming and caring for an extended family. Older rural women contribute significantly to the family and their communities, especially in cases where, left behind by migrating adults or as a result of other socio-economic factors, they are obliged to assume childcare, household and agricultural responsibilities.

Culture of discrimination

Ultimately, the eradication of poverty will come about only if the systemic and structural causes are addressed. Challenging the cultural, traditional and normative practices that condone inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls is critical to the eradication of poverty, as Ol Fawole stated in an article entitled "Economic violence to women and girls: is it receiving the necessary attention?" published in *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* in 2008.

The pattern of occupational inequality stems from a culture of discrimination which denies women access to the basic ingredients of economic status — education, land and decent work. Other obstacles to the enjoyment by women and girls of their rights arise when they are prevented from going to school or from accessing health care, or are subject to harmful traditional practices.

Women in rural areas have limited mobility and access to resources and are disproportionately affected by such phenomena as natural disasters, fires, flood and other environmental hazards.

Legal rights

Although women play a major role in crop production, few are landowners. Women are frequently denied entitlement to land, property and inheritance. It is estimated that women constitute one third or less of all landowners and own less than 10 per cent of the world's property.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, women obtain land rights chiefly through their husbands. They lose these rights when they are divorced or widowed. The spread of HIV/AIDS has exacerbated the problem of widows losing their rights to land (see "Improving women's lives: progress and obstacles", available from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources,Chap.2.pdf). According

to a UN-Women briefing, not even 2 per cent of land is owned by women in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Land ownership by women has contributed to their empowerment and security. Not only does land provide a means of livelihood, it can also be used as collateral for loans to generate income. In many countries, the right to collect water and firewood and grazing rights for animals are dependent upon land ownership. Without land as collateral, it is difficult for women to open bank accounts, gain access to credit, receive training or obtain tools. Without the security of land or income, women and their families struggle for livelihood, education, sanitation, health care and other basic rights. Additionally, researchers have found that widely dispersed ownership of property is an essential component of a just and moral economics system.

The Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women both affirm the rights of rural women to land and property and to equal treatment in land and agrarian reform. Nonetheless, many rural women do not have equal rights to property under the law or in actual practice at the grass-roots level.

Poverty reduction will be strengthened by laws that ensure women's rights to land ownership and inheritance (see General Assembly resolution 64/215). The enhanced economic security of women who own property contributes to the reduction of feminized poverty and domestic violence.

Access to resources, including education

Women continue to have less access than men to productive resources, including education, health care, land, decent work, information and financial resources. This reduced access hinders women's ability to participate in the economy and to contribute to higher living standards for their families. For example, inefficient allocation of productive resources within households causes significant output losses and low investment in girls' education significantly reduces a country's economic output.

Women and girls are important economic actors. The *Gender Gap Report 2010* notes that greater gender equality correlates with a higher gross national product. Although few women own land, they produce more than 50 per cent of the world's food. It is estimated that providing women farmers access to tools and resources could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 150 million.

Rural women are less likely than men to have access to useful non-formal education or training opportunities, with the exception of literacy courses and courses in handicrafts. Women perform most farming tasks and therefore lack equal access to formal education. A recent IFAD/FAO study notes that in Africa women very rarely participate in courses on animal traction and animal health even when they are the ones doing the livestock-raising. Such gender bias continues to exist and must be addressed.

Improving women's access to education and to non-formal training needs to be done in conjunction with improving their access to other assets and opportunities.

Conclusion

Social and economic indicators for developing countries consistently show that women bear the brunt of hardship in poor communities. Women are not only on the front line in producing the food which feeds the majority of the world's population, but they are also key agents in the reduction of poverty. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations noted in his message on the occasion of the International Day of Rural Women, 15 October 2011, "despite the heavy responsibilities rural women shoulder, they lack equal access to opportunities and resources".

Poverty will continue, especially in rural areas, as long as inequality of rights and opportunities exists between women and girls and men and boys. Because education is universally accepted as a key to poverty eradication and social development, it is imperative that gender parity be achieved at all levels of education. Ultimately, experience demonstrates that education is more effective than laws in empowering women and girls to overcome the barriers to equality.

A more just and equal world will only be built when men and women work together to resolve the issue of poverty. Both men and women have crucial but differentiated roles to play in changing the dominant social customs and cultural practices that are prejudiced against women and that condone violence against women and girls.

Recommendations

We urge Member States:

- To design, revise and implement laws to ensure that rural women are accorded full and equal rights to own and lease land and other property, including through the right to inheritance
- To initiate administrative reforms and other necessary measures to give women the same access as men to credit, capital, appropriate technologies, information and markets
- To uphold and protect the rights of rural women to land, resources and benefits that arise from the management of their households
- To increase investments in small-scale agriculture, especially for women farmers
- To provide for the basic needs of rural women through the adoption of a social protection floor that responds to the specific needs of the country
- To undertake a systematic reform of education at all levels in order to ensure equality of access to, and the availability of, gender-sensitive and rights-based education for all.